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Harmony in Marriage:

## 7. Compatibility and Conflict

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

### Factors Influencing Compatibility

*Compatibility can partially be described as the extent of agreement or disagreement of husband and wife on a variety of subjects.* Thus it is helpful if husbands and wives can reach maximum agreement on the following:

- Employment**—type, place, hours of employment of husband and wife.
- Money matters**—amount needed, how earned, way managed.
- Families**—relationships with parents and in-laws, how to deal with families.
- Social life**—extent, type, leisure time activities.
- Friends**—selection of, and relationships with men and women friends.
- Religion**—views on, church affiliation, participation in religious activities.
- Values, philosophy of life**—ethics, goals, ultimate concerns.
- Sex, demonstration of affection**—type, amount, frequency.
- Matters of conventionality**—manners, morals, living habits (i. e. table manners, dress, drinking, smoking, cleanliness, etc.).
- Children**—number wanted, raising, disciplining, caring for them.
- Roles**—of husband and wife in and outside home.

This approach to compatibility assumes that the more husbands and wives agree on the above subjects the greater their compatibility.

*Temperament affects compatibility.* Temperament is the total physical and emotional activity and response pattern of the individual. Thus, one person may be active, energetic and enthusiastic while another may be inactive, quiet, and phlegmatic. Or, one person is emotional, excitable, and sensitive; another is placid, quiet, with a very calm, even disposition.

Thus, temperament may have a lot to do with how two people get along with one another. *Generally, those of like temperament are more compatible than those unlike in temperament, except in those cases where both the husband and wife are neurotic or*

psychotic. Obviously, it would be hard for two emotionally disturbed persons to get along with one another (even though they were similar in temperament).

*Compatibility can also be described in terms of needs.* Robert Blood, in his book on Marriage, talks about *complementary needs* and *parallel needs*. One example of complementary needs is the need to be *dominant* versus the need to be *submissive*. Thus, if a husband or wife feels the need to dominate, the couple is more compatible if the other mate feels the need to be submissive. If both partners need to dominate, the results are explosive because of the competition. If both need to be submissive, the results are usually quite frustrating to both.

Another example of complementary needs is the need for *nurturance* versus the need for *succorance*. Thus, some persons need to nurture others by giving sympathy or aid to a weak, helpless, ill or dejected person. Others need to be helped, protected, loved, nursed, indulged, by a sympathetic person.

A third example of complementary needs is the need for *deference*. That is, some people need the admiration and recognition of others; some need to admire and praise others.

The list of complementary needs could be extended to include many other things. Obviously, persons with complementary needs of various kinds can be very compatible in marriage.

*Parallel needs are similar needs shared by both the husband and the wife.* Thus, a husband has an intense inner drive for success in business; his wife wants very much to be married to a successful man who can give her social and economic status. Their needs parallel



each other. Other examples include a similar or parallel need for sex, food, children, for warmth and affection, religion, or education. Parallel needs are concerned too with inward or outward orientation. Are the partners primarily concerned about their personal relationship with one another or their relationship with the outside world? Compatibility requires that they be oriented in the same direction.

Another way to analyze and describe compatibility is to refer to background factors relating to marital success. The following lists, adapted from Duvall's book, *When You Marry*, summarize some important research findings which show the relationship between personality, cultural and family background, sociability, (emotional) response patterns, sex factors, and marital success.

### BACKGROUND FACTORS IN MARITAL SUCCESS

#### FAVORABLE

#### UNFAVORABLE

#### Personality Characteristics

Considerate attitudes	Lack of self-confidence — husband
Cooperative	Man daydreams and woman does not
Compatibility of temperament	Husband inferior and woman not
Combinations if neither neurotic	Like to argue—wife Want own way—wife
Combinations if both high IQ	Pessimistic, unhappy temperament Variable moods Feelings easily hurt

#### Cultural and Family Backgrounds

#### FAVORABLE

#### UNFAVORABLE

Similar cultural background	Dissimilar background
Similar education	Wife has better cultural background than husband
Father of high occupational level	City residence during childhood
Firm but not harsh home training	
Happiness of parents' marriage	
Conservative home background	

#### Sociability Factors

Frequency of attendance at church and Sunday school	Unconventionality with respect to religion, sexual ethics, drinking
Number of friends	Religiously inactive
Residence in single family dwellings	
Socially conservative	

#### Response Patterns

Love based on companionship	Romantic infatuation as basis of love
Length of acquaintance before marriage	Disapproval of marriage by parents, especially husband
	Conflict with father

Similarity of fiancé with one's own parent of opposite sex  
Strong attachment to father  
Both enjoy engaging in many activities together

#### Sex Factors

Sex information received from parents first	Premarital intercourse by either or both
Frank and encouraging attitudes of parents toward child's curiosity about sex	Prudishness and excessive modesty of wife
Similarity in sex desires	Fear of sex—wife
Orgasm capacity in wife	Differences in strength of sex desire
Amount of pleasure wife experiences during first intercourse	

#### Seven Problem Areas

The causes of conflict may be quite subtle, usually relating to some type of immaturity. For example, the husband is emotionally insecure, so becomes overly domineering or submissive. The wife is hostile toward all men because of a poor relationship with her own father, so she nags her husband and belittles him in little ways. However, these subtle, immature feelings which often are the origin of problems, usually come out in one or more problem areas.

Judson T. Landis made an intensive study of 409 couples to determine major areas of conflict. Ninety-nine and two-tenths per cent of these couples rated their marriages as average, happy, or very happy. Only 0.8 per cent indicated they were unhappy in any degree. From this study, Landis identified seven major areas. These are: sex, social life, child training, religion, money, in-laws, and mutual friends.

There are several particularly interesting aspects to this study. One, Landis showed that even those couples who were somewhat happy in their marriages rarely had complete agreement in all areas. However, none of the couples who remained unadjusted in three or more areas rated their marriage higher than average.

Two, Landis showed that adjustment is easier in some areas than others. The following table shows the adjustment for these couples after being married on an average of 20 years. The table is adapted from the *American Sociological Review*, 11:666-77.

A quick glance at the table reveals that sex and child rearing are the principal problems after 20 years of marriage. Money and mutual friends are the least troublesome. At the beginning of marriage, these same couples found that sex and money were the principal problems. Religion and mutual friends were the least troublesome (child training was not included in the list at the beginning of marriage).



Area of Adjustment	OK for Both	OK for One (Per Cent)	Not Agreed	Not OK for other but working to improve	At stand- still, never discussed anymore	Impos- sible many quarrels
Sex	63.1	8.3	16.2	2.4	6.1	3.9
Child Training	70.7	5.8	13.1	5.8	1.2	3.4
Social Life	72.1	6.2	9.8	3.4	4.5	4.0
Religion	75.8	6.0	8.3	2.6	5.7	1.6
In-laws	76.5	5.6	8.4	1.9	3.7	3.9
Money	77.0	5.3	7.5	6.0	1.9	2.3
Mutual Friends	82.1	3.1	7.1	3.0	2.9	1.8

## How Conflict Starts

Conflict may begin in a number of ways and for a variety of reasons.

*Conflict may start because of fatigue.* Just plain tiredness is one of the greatest enemies of marital harmony. Fatigue brings irritability, emotional upset, impatience, distorted reasoning, and a low frustration tolerance. It causes people to say and do things that they wouldn't ordinarily. Sometimes a good night's sleep will release more tension than an all-night battle.

*Anxiety, worry, and fear cause conflict.* A husband is worried about the family finances or his job, so takes out his anxiety on his wife and children. A wife is worried about the children, is afraid of losing her husband, or is concerned about a misunderstanding with a next door neighbor. She gets upset easily and **her husband finds her ready to fight with him at the slightest excuse.**

*Frustration causes conflict.* One of the most common causes of conflict is sexual frustration. Other important causes are emotional frustration (lack of love, support, appreciation, acceptance, praise, understanding, sympathy); economic frustration (lack of money to buy things needed and/or wanted); social frustration (inability to get a desired job, to work outside the home, to accomplish what one sets out to do on a job, or the lack of satisfaction with occupation or the work one is doing).

*Resentment, hostility cause conflict.* Sometimes the hostility has its origin in childhood or outside the immediate family. But it affects the present family relationships. Thus, a man who has a very deep resentment toward his mother or mother-in-law may take out his hostility on his wife or daughter who reminds him of one of them. A husband who is continually resentful of the way he is treated by his boss vents his anger on his teen-age son. At other times the resentment is stimulated by one's spouse. A husband may resent a wife who is too dependent, domineering, a spendthrift, or a poor housekeeper. A wife may resent

her husband because he is crude, insensitive, irresponsible, unfaithful, lazy, or a poor money manager.

*Disagreement causes conflict.* Not all conflict has a deep psychological reason behind it. Couples who have perfectly normal, rational, mature feelings can have honest disagreements and different points of view.

*Conflict may start over misunderstanding.* The husband or wife misinterpretes what the other says or does, or misjudges intentions, motives, or feelings. One of the most common complaints of both husbands and wives is: "He (or she) doesn't understand me." Or, "We can never talk to one another." Or, "We can't seem to communicate." "She always misinteprets everything I do and say." "He doesn't seem to understand how I feel." Naturally, this causes resentment, but also results in disagreement until real feelings, motives, or actions are corrected, interpreted and accepted. A spouse who makes an unwarranted assumption about something his mate did or said, who never verifies the assumption by asking, who projects his own feelings into the mate's reactions, may feel hurt or angry unnecessarily. He should first ask what is meant, felt, or intended. In any relationship, the interpretation of what one does, the meaning attached to it, is often as important as the act itself.

*The real cause of conflict may be hidden.* One of the sure signs that trouble exists is nagging or complaining. A husband may come home from work upset and start complaining about the condition of the house, his wife's neglect of the children, or her activities outside the home. What the husband complains about is not so important as the fact that he is upset. The wife's task is to ask: "Why is he upset? What is really wrong?" Or, a wife starts nagging her husband as soon as he gets home to mow the lawn, fix the cellar stairs, or the hall light. Actually, she may not be upset over any of these things, but is annoyed by something a friend said about her. She may be worried about something that happened to one of the children. The trivial things she is nagging about may have nothing to do with the real problem.



*Husbands and wives must try to interpret and understand each other's feelings, rather than just listen to the words.* Behavior is much of the time controlled by feeling. To understand the causes of conflict, spouses must get at the origins of the upset feelings.

### Is Quarreling Desirable?

*Does quarreling hurt or help marriage?* Some couples feel that no good comes from open conflict in the family. The following comments illustrate this point of view.

"If you don't have anything good to say it's better to keep still."

"Avoid controversial issues."

"Complaints just lead to an argument so it's better not to say anything."

"Some things are better not discussed."

Those who hold this point of view emphasize the absence of quarrels in their relationship as a criterion for successful marriage.

"Bill and I resolved never to quarrel about anything. I think this is why we have kept our marriage intact."

There are, however, some disadvantages to this type of adjustment. Issues that never are discussed remain unsolved. Feelings that are not expressed still exist to become festering sores which influence the relationship. Sometimes intense negative feelings build up to the point where a major explosion occurs. Lack of quarreling sometimes indicates indifference, or a deterioration of the relationship to the point where the husband and wife have very little companionship left, and many times have little to say to or do with one another.

When feelings don't come out in quarrels, they are often expressed in other ways. *Nagging* is one of the most common ways of letting off tension. But it can become habitual, eventually creating resentment in the partner being nagged. *Criticism* or *belittling* is a way some people express resentment. A wife or husband who deliberately criticizes or tries to shame the other, especially in the presence of company, is expressing tension that has not been released. Such attacks build up hostility and may result in the other person hurting back. *Rejection* is another means of expressing tension. The wife who is mad at her husband may reject him sexually; the husband may ignore her, refuse to talk to her. *Getting even* is another way of easing tension. A husband will leave his clothes lying around when he knows it makes his wife angry. Or he may withhold money, or annoy her during her favorite TV program. A wife may spend more money than she should "to punish" her husband,

serve him a meal he doesn't like, or refuse to wash his clothes.

*Sometimes couples who don't dare express their negative feelings at home do so outside the home.* Driving the car recklessly is a common but very dangerous way of relieving tension. Husbands may take out their hostilities on fellow employees, on those who work under them, or on the family pet. Wives may express their feelings by taking it out on the children, a neighbor, or friend. Less harmful ways of letting off steam outside the home are work (especially physical labor), sports and recreation (either as a participant or observer), humor and laughter, conversation with friends, or community service. Many husbands work off tension by swatting a golf ball, mowing the lawn, hiking in the hills, hunting or fishing. Many wives relieve their feelings in the weekly bridge game, or by working in the garden. Everyone needs to relieve tension. Some people have learned to do so in socially-acceptable, constructive ways; others hurt themselves and others by the methods they use.

*Most couples have some quarrels.* In one national survey, four out of five couples admitted that they had marital disputes. The researchers felt that those who said they did not either had such serious difficulties that they wouldn't admit them, they were still honeymooners, or had passed their golden wedding anniversary and had forgotten about their troubles. In the close, intimate relationships of family life, it is almost inevitable that couples have some disagreements, and that tension arises from time to time. There is a need, therefore, for couples to learn how to relieve their tensions.

*A certain amount of quarreling in marriage should be considered normal and good mental hygiene.* Quarreling in the first year of marriage can bring the couple face to face with the realities of marriage and help them to find a firmer foundation for their union than romantic love. Quarreling can illuminate essential issues and differences. It can also help couples to learn how close they want to be to each other. Too close an association becomes intolerable to some. Quarreling helps couples to set the boundaries of their relationship, to find that distance in which needs are met without being so involved that all identity and freedom are lost. Quarreling can also allow couples the freedom to be themselves. It can relieve tensions, clear the air, build closer relationships, and help the marriage.



*Quarreling can help or hurt a marriage depending upon its outcome. Have issues been resolved? Problems clarified or solved? Tensions relieved? Closeness restored? Has reconciliation been accomplished? Or, have negative feelings been further stimulated, tensions and frustrations increased, and the relationship further strained?*

One husband remarked: "After Judy and I quarrel, we end up not talking to one another for a week."

Obviously, such a quarrel increases tension rather than eases it. Couples must learn to use quarreling in constructive ways that help the marriage.

### How Can Quarrels Be Constructive?

Harvard University studies of role conflict in the family describe how families actually deal with their conflicts. The studies reveal three basic ways of dealing with conflict.

*Some individuals try to get their spouse to change while remaining the same themselves.* This method is essentially manipulative in that the individual tries to win his point and get his mate to do what he wants. Various methods of changing the other person are used.

**Coercing** may involve verbal commands, threats, or even physical attack or threat of attack. It doesn't work if the other person is defiant.

**Coaxing** involves asking, pleading, nagging, tempting, promising.

**Evaluation** involves praising, blaming, shaming, approving, or disapproving as a means of winning the point or changing the other person's ideas or behavior.

**Masking** is the deliberate withholding of pertinent information to distort a situation. It may involve pretending, distorting, censoring, evading, or lying about the situation.

**Postponing** is sometimes tried in the hope that there will be a change of attitude.

*Some try to assume the role of the other person in trying to understand his or her point of view.* A wife or husband who asks questions to clarify and understand the other's point of view is using this technique, as is the mate who says: "I want to explain how I feel about this so you will understand." Since this method does not try to change the other's mind but tries to understand the mind and actions of the other, it can lead to greater understanding.

*Others seek to develop insight and then to modify their roles and positions to fit the situation as they have come to see it.* This method begins where the second leaves off, but goes farther by resulting in each person changing his position to conform to the realities of the situation.

Too many husbands and wives try to settle differences by the first method, by each trying to win his

point, by trying to change the other's mind, by getting him to concede or surrender. Often nothing is settled because the real issues are not clarified, understanding is not developed, tension still remains (at least in the frustrated partner), or both refuse to concede.

The following suggestions should be helpful in making quarrels constructive:

1. Seek to understand, not to win.
2. Let the conversation clarify the issues and differences.
3. Make your position clear through a careful explanation of exactly what you think and how you feel.
4. Try to completely understand your mate's point of view and feelings by careful listening, questioning, and by a sympathetic attitude.
5. Stick to the point and avoid side issues.
6. Listen not only to the words said but try to understand and accept the feelings expressed.
7. Get it out, don't let it fester.
8. Pick the right times to quarrel, if possible, when fatigue, hunger, illness, a rushed schedule, or the lateness of the hour do not prevent a happy outcome.
9. Attack the problem, not each other. Avoid words that shame, belittle, or damage the other's ego.
10. Quarrel privately.
11. Let the quarrel end when it is over. This does not necessarily mean that a solution is found, but it does mean that tensions are relieved for now.

### What About Getting Outside Help?

If more people would seek outside help with marital problems, many marriages could be saved. Most family problems begin as little problems, but because of the inability of couples to handle them as they arise, the problems soon become big ones. If these problems don't wreck the marriage, they certainly cause much misery in the family.

*Couples need to recognize the value of getting help before the problems wreck the marriage.* Most situations can be improved if couples are willing to swallow their pride and seek assistance. For example, a visit to the family doctor or to a specialist in gynecology is a wise step for couples having problems with sex adjustment. Most physicians can be of real help to such couples. A banker, lawyer, or expert in family finance (many County Extension Agents are well trained in family economics) can help with money problems. Many clergymen offer pre-marital or marriage courses; many are well trained in personal counseling and can help couples solve their problems. The University of Maine through the Cooperative Extension Service sponsors family life education programs throughout the state. Private agencies such as Child and Family services offer expert counseling help. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and marriage counselors offer private consultation. The Department of Health and Welfare will offer various kinds of assistance to families. Child Guidance Centers provide help for parents



having problems with children, but they also can be of tremendous assistance to couples seeking help with marriage problems. Hospitals, clinics, and mental

health associations offer help for those with emotional and family problems.

For specific information about mental health facilities available in the state of Michigan, write to:

Michigan Department of Mental Health  
Information Education Office  
Lewis Cass Building  
Lansing, Michigan 48913

The Information Education Office of the Michigan Department of Mental Health can offer suggestions as to where and from whom help can be received about emotional, marital, and family concerns.

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